

LETTERS *to the Editor*

Population Problems

To the Editor: In his letter on the world distribution of population growth [Calif Med 113: 80, Sept. 1970] Dr. Quinlivan makes three of the common errors in population analysis. He concludes that "A possible solution to famine, illiteracy, and territorial wars would be to direct some of the enormous amounts of talent, thought, energy, and money at present used to limit the population growth of the United States and Europe towards educating the people of China, India, Africa, Latin America, etc."

One fallacy in this logic is what might be called the "scale error." It is assumed that a significant dent can be made in the world's population problem by diverting the resources of a few thousand private individuals from domestic educational efforts (such as Zero Population Growth—ZPG) to international development projects. It is sad but true that the annual expenditures of ZPG (about \$100,000) would barely suffice to

build and staff one teacher training college or one agricultural experimental station in a single developing country.

A second error, the "cost-benefit fallacy," has its source in resource economics. Very briefly, each American baby in his lifetime will consume fifty or more times as much food, fuel, fiber and metal, and he will pollute the environment fifty or more times as much as his less affluent contemporary born in the underdeveloped world. The U.S.A. alone is now consuming over one-third of the world's production of raw materials, much of it nonrenewable. In a recent Senate speech, George Murphy announced that we are beholden to extraterritorial sources for more than sixty vital materials. One cost of our conspicuous plundering is the deforestation and demineralization of countries that ought to be conserving their natural resources for their own development. In short, it is misleading indeed to focus on absolute numbers of people—what is important is their impact on the present and future environment.

The third error is political and sociological. Any Westerner who promotes the cause of population control in the underdeveloped countries can be accused (often unjustly) of racist leanings. Ambitious demagogues can and do exploit the "anti-imperialist" fuel in this issue. Further, it is a sociological truism that large families are usually seen as desirable in poor, rural societies lacking old-age insurance. "Education" is no panacea when it runs counter to the obvious self-interest of a poor peasant.

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